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SIPDIS

FROM AMBASSADOR STEPHENS TO AMBASSADOR HOLBROOKE
BEIJING PASS TO SRAP AMBASSADOR HOLBROOKE

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [MARR](#) [AF](#) [PK](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: SRAP HOLBROOKE'S VISIT TO KOREA

REF: SECSTATE 31102

Classified By: AMBASSADOR KATHLEEN STEPHENS. REASONS 1.4 (b),(d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Summary: Ambassador Holbrooke, welcome to Seoul. Although your stay in Seoul is barely three hours, you are seeing the three key Koreans shaping ROK foreign policy: President Lee, FM Yu and NSA Kim. President Lee and his advisors are eager to hear directly your sense of the way forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They will also be keenly interested in your insights into Obama Administration foreign policy writ large, and where Korea fits in.

12. (C) ROK President Lee Myung-bak wants to strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance and to increase the ROK's international role in economic policy, overseas development aid (ODA), and foreign affairs. For Afghanistan, this means that to date the ROKG has provided some support, but not at the levels the USG had requested. The same may be said for ROK aid to Pakistan, although U.S. requests to the ROKG in that area are new and still developing. Thus far, the ROKG has confirmed to us that it will offer a \$160 million soft loan package for Pakistan during the April 17 donors' conference in Tokyo. Lee's low poll ratings, an active opposition in the ROK National Assembly, public sensitivity to putting Korean troops in harm's way, and budget pressures caused by South Korea's economic downturn are serious constraints on greater ROK assistance. Nonetheless, the lead up to President Lee's pending June 16 summit with President Obama presents an

excellent opportunity for the USG to ask the ROKG to demonstrate concretely its support for the U.S.-ROK alliance, and its commitment to a global role in world affairs, by making a significant contribution to both Afghanistan and Pakistan. I recommend that you use your meetings with President Lee, FM Yu and NSA Kim to make it clear to them exactly what Washington expects South Korea to do to help bring stability to Afghanistan and Pakistan. END SUMMARY.

South Korea' Expanding Global Engagement

13. (C) A ROK Military Engineer and Medical unit of approximately 200 troops operated at Bagram, Afghanistan from 2002 through the end of 2007. The unit had 1 KIA casualty as a result of a suicide bombing outside the gate of the airbase in February 2007. Then in July 2007, 23 South Korean missionaries were kidnapped for several weeks by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Two were killed before the ROKG succeeded in getting the rest released in exchange for what was widely believed to be a sizable ransom payment. By the end of that year, when annual legislation that authorized the Korean troop dispatch to Afghanistan expired, the ROKG brought all its soldiers home from Bagram. The prospect of sending the ROK military back to Afghanistan is therefore a sensitive political debate that pulls the South Koreans in two opposing directions. On the one hand, as a treaty ally, the ROKG would like to be responsive to President Obama's call for allied troop contributions. On the other hand, the ROK feels no serious threat from the Taliban so long as it stays out of Afghanistan, and unlike in Iraq, where there is oil, the Koreans don't see much in the way of future economic interests in pursuing a deepening relationship with Afghanistan.

14. (C) In February 2008, however, six months after the hostage crisis, President Lee came to office wanting the ROK to become more active in a wider variety of areas internationally. One of the central themes of his foreign policy has been the need to increase the ROK's global role. When Lee took office, the ROK already had troops in Iraq (withdrawn in December 2008), civilian medical personnel in Afghanistan, and military personnel in the UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL). As the fiscal and economic crisis worsened in the fourth quarter of 2008, the ROKG became more active in international economic fora, especially the G20. Then, in early March, Lee announced that the ROKG's goal was to increase ODA from \$734 million (2007 figure) to \$3.0 billion by 2015, which would represent more than a threefold increase. He followed that by announcing a new regional diplomacy plan. The ROKG also deployed a navy destroyer in March to participate in international counter-piracy efforts off the Somali Coast. The ROKG is increasing its role in the areas of climate change and global health issues.

Current ROK Contributions to Afghanistan

15. (SBU) The ROKG's current principal contribution to coalition efforts in Afghanistan consists of a 25-person civilian Korean Medical and Vocational Training Team (KMVTT) that began operations in July 2008 at Bagram Airbase, where the previously deployed ROK military had operated before its departure in December 2007. The KMVTT provides basic medical services for up to 150 Afghan and coalition patients per day. The ROK is also planning to expand its presence in Bagram Air Base by building police training and vocational facilities, and a new hospital. Upon completion of the police training facility, the ROKG plans to send 12 police trainers.

16. (SBU) In addition to the KMVTT, the ROKG has three aid projects under way in Afghanistan, and is in the process of providing 300 motorcycles, 100 ambulances, and additional equipment. The ROK and Japan are also cooperating on small

joint agricultural and vocational training projects.

¶17. (U) The ROKG pledged \$30 million in funds at the Paris Support Conference in June 2008, for a total of \$86.2 million in financial assistance pledged to date. Of this amount, the ROK indicated it would contribute \$500,000 to the UNDP basket fund for Afghan elections from 2009 to 2010.

ROK Contributions Not At USG Requested Levels

¶18. (C) Nonetheless, the ROKG has not yet provided a response, positive or negative to other USG requests (listed in reftel). In particular, at the end of last year we asked the ROK to contribute \$100M per year for five years, from 2010-2014, to help sustain the Afghan National Army (ANA). Also in 2008, the USG asked the ROKG to provide intelligence and engineering support, such as mid-altitude UAVs, including operators, maintainers, an intelligence analyst cell, and engineering assets to increase basing requirements as necessary. Since deploying this kind of support, however, requires the consent of the National Assembly, the ROKG cited the potential for a political and public backlash as reasons for going slow on this request.

¶19. (C) The USG also asked the ROKG last year to supply army trainers and mentors to the Afghan National Army, trainers to the Kabul Military Training Center (KMTC), mentors at the Ministry of Defense, and staff at CSTC-A. The ROKG apparently believed that these requests were interchangeable with the USG request for police trainers. The ROKG chose to do the latter because it views that option as less controversial.

ROKG Aid to Pakistan

¶10. (C) The ROKG has confirmed to us that it will offer a \$160 million soft loan package for Pakistan during the April 17 donors' conference in Tokyo. This is not new aid, however, because Korea and Pakistan have already signed the \$160 million soft loan package. The issue now is working out the details of where to spend the money. KOICA, the Korea Overseas International Cooperation Agency, which is administering the loan, will have a representative at the conference to provide further details. In addition, the ROKG will probably add in a small unspecified amount of grant aid.

Domestic Political Constraints

¶11. (C) President Lee Myung-bak's political fortunes have been volatile during his fourteen months in office. Initially, it looked like he would have an easier time when his conservative Grand National Party also won majority control of the unicameral National Assembly last year. The electoral victories, however, did not translate into political strength. Instead, Lee faced large-scale street protests over his decision to resume U.S. beef imports in mid-2008. Since then, he has also had to endure fractious infighting within his own party for leadership positions in the National Assembly, televised physical fights between ruling and opposition lawmakers over his legislative agenda, and personal and public disappointment when his promise of a return to robust economic growth went sour in the wake of the global economic crisis. The result is that his approval rating has hovered around 25-35 percent for the last six months, and political observers have belittled his deal-making skills. Lee's increasingly energetic attempts to check the activities of leftist NGOs and political groups have added to the confrontational political environment.

¶12. (C) For President Lee, foreign policy is a relatively bright spot. His emphasis on closer relations with the United States, his pursuit of what he calls "resource

diplomacy," and his efforts to restore relations with neighbors -- especially Japan -- get high marks among South Koreans. Despite the beef protests last summer, Korea now has the most open market in Asia for U.S. beef. South Koreans are generally "pro-American" and so approve of his close relationship with Washington. Several recent developments in U.S.-ROK relations have also been helpful, including the USG decision to include South Korea in the Visa Waiver Program, our introduction of the WEST (Work, English Study, Travel) exchange program in the U.S. for Korean college students, and the Fed's USD 30 billion swap facility for the Bank of Korea at a time when it was most needed.

Toward A 21st Century Strategic Alliance

¶13. (SBU) Presidents Obama and Lee had a warm meeting on the margins of the G20 summit in London on April 2. Notably, for your visit, President Obama praised the ROKG for "the outstanding contributions that Korea has made with respect to the Afghanistan situation." The meeting resulted in the announcement of a June 16 summit between the leaders in Washington, during which the leaders agreed they would unveil a vision statement for an upgraded 21st Century U.S.-ROK Strategic Alliance. Although we have not yet agreed on a text, our joint articulation of a common vision for the future is sure to mention, and should help to foster, greater ROK involvement in addressing serious challenges around the world. In that spirit, the time is right to encourage increased ROK involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, although we doubt that the Koreans will make firm pledges until the summit meeting in Washington in June.

Comment

¶14. (C) For the South Koreans, the most difficult aspect of any future ROK assistance for Afghanistan remains the dispatch of ROK soldiers, including our request for a military-operated UAV reconnaissance unit. That is because sending ROK troops overseas requires National Assembly approval, as was the case with their previous military deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, the aforementioned 2007 Korean-Taliban hostage incident was a national crisis that shook South Korean public support for anything to do with Afghanistan, especially the dispatch of troops.

¶15. (C) For our part, we need to be clear what we really want and expect the Koreans to do. How important is it to have ROK troops on the ground in Afghanistan? Recent communications from Washington indicated that we were not enthusiastic about the participation of Korean troops in Afghanistan, especially if they would not be self sufficient for their own force protection, and logistical and transportation support. If that is the case, you might want to make it clear to President Lee and FM Yu that, rather than troops, the USG is looking for enhanced financial and other support from Korea, which is politically easier for them in any case. Such clarity from you will remove a big potential political headache for the ROKG and enable it to concentrate on delivering a bigger financial package.

¶16. (SBU) Mr. Ambassador, I look forward to working closely with you to convince the South Koreans that they too have an enormous stake in stabilizing Afghanistan and Pakistan.
STEPHENS